



Gwen Davis

9th grade students at Summit Sierra Public School work on their online individualized learning.

Seattle charter school calls on supporters to ‘be courageous’ despite ruling

West Seattle Herald

10/28/2015

By Gwen Davis

Will the highly-anticipated West Seattle charter school actually open, now that charters have been deemed unconstitutional? No one knows, but many are hopeful.

To garner more hope and support, on Wednesday morning Summit Sierra Public School, part of the organization that would host the West Seattle charter school, put on an info session where families, prospective families and other interested individuals could get an inside look into a typical school day.

The school wanted to show the public what the classrooms, teachers and children looked like.

Roughly 30 attendees showed at the fresh, new building on S. King Street. Staff first gave the crowd a history of the founding of the Summit Public School nonprofit organization, as well as an overview of charter schools in Washington State. They made an emotional appeal as to why they loved charter schools so much.

"I deeply believe in the need for them in our community," said Jen Wickens, chief regional officer of Summit Public Schools. "We raised the money, found amazing leaders, found faculty members, some local, some coming from other places in the nation, and they trained all summer in California, learning our model," she said.

115 teachers applied to teach at Summit Sierra, with only 12 accepted. However, only around 50 percent of the teachers were from the Seattle area.

"We have a long student wait-list and a diverse student population that we're immensely proud of in our two schools," she said, referring to the Seattle and Tacoma schools.

Only 20 percent of students at Summit Sierra are white.

"We got our building and had an absolute blast for three weeks where students got to experience what it was like to be in a charter public school that they and their family chose," she said. "They got to experience fantastic teachers where all students are on a college track. They got to meet their mentor who did home visits with them."

And then the bad news came.

"The Friday before Labor Day weekend the state Supreme Court ruling was announced," she said. "So you could imagine what our families were feeling and what we were feeling. It was kind of like a condensed grieving process. Anger, shock, depression, but now we're feeling hopeful and committed. We gathered our families the next Monday and said we'll deliver what we promised: a year [of]. They cheered and they stuck with us."

Wickens said there would be a lot of loss if the schools had to shut down.

"We feel like now we created history in Washington State and have proven that there's demand for charters," she said. "We showed they can do exceptional things for students socially, emotionally and academically. We now have more to lose. Because we have all these families and all these kids. It's an opportunity for all of us to stand up, be courageous and show there's a need for change."

Things can change, she said.

"Obviously, the final ruling hasn't been announced," Wickens continued. "We are committed to operating our full program for the entire year, and are hopeful our elected officials will do the right thing and stand behind the voters and fix this glitch."

Two other staff members additionally addressed the crowd.

Attendees were then escorted to three classrooms, with session in full swing. The 9th grade students were mainly working in groups on their computers.

Afterwards, there was time for discussion and sharing.

Nancy Spiro, a parent who has a student at Arbor Heights Elementary School said that if the West Seattle charter school doesn't open, she'd be devastated.

"I've been hopeful about this," she said. "I've hoped that my [and my friend's] will have the opportunity to start middle school in our neighborhood, and have a choice to have this amazing education. Right now we don't feel we have a

choice of where our students are going to go. This school's class size, the education model, and the preparation for college is absolutely our only hope for our children," she said.

"We've thought of going out of the district," Spiro stated. "We don't want to stay with the public schools, and this would be an option to stay in our district and have the education we want for our kids."